

## **Setting the Stage: What is the proper context for teaching religion in public schools?**

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### Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should be able to:

Distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate methods of teaching of religion in public schools, as demonstrated by the creation of a t-chart, 3 creative scenarios involving the teaching of religion, and an appropriate lesson plan that deals with a religious topic.

### Context:

This lesson, along with "Introduction to Religion in American Society and Government" is designed to give students an introduction to the topic, including why it has been controversial. It is suitable for a variety of social studies classes, including U.S. History and World Civilization.

### Kentucky Academic Expectations:

2.15 Students recognize varying forms of government and address issues of importance to citizens in a democracy, including authority, power, civic action, and rights and responsibilities.

2.20 Students recognize continuity and change in historic events, conditions, trends, and issues in order to make decisions for a better future.

### Materials:

overhead projector  
blank index cards (4x6 or 5x8)  
student handout #1 (Student Lesson Plan) -- classroom set  
teacher handout #1( Appropriate Ways to Teach Religion) -- one transparency  
teacher handout #2 (Scenarios) -- one transparency

\*\*\*\*\*For Kentucky Teachers: Some background material that might be helpful includes several Lexington Herald Leader articles on the posting of the Ten Commandments. The Lexington Herald Leader web site is [www.kentucky.com](http://www.kentucky.com) Articles appeared on 2/9/00, 3/2/00 and 5/6/00 as well as other dates. A Tom Toles (Buffalo News) political cartoon, dealing with evolution, was used in the H-L on 4/5/00. \*\*\*\*\*

### Procedures:

#### 1. Anticipatory set:

What kind of controversy has been occurring in Kentucky recently over the teaching of religion in public schools? What document in particular has been the focus of debate and legal rulings? With a partner, brainstorm for 45 seconds what you know about this topic.

As students discuss, teacher circulates and listens to discussions, ask the questions again to refocus, then selects a student (whose discussion was heard by the teacher) to answer. Continue to call on a few students and then ask for any volunteers. Briefly discuss background to debate on posting of the Ten Commandments, etc. (Teachers might wish to refer to the Lexington Herald Leader articles for background information.) Do not allow students to discuss their specific views on how religion should be taught at this point.

2. Optional: Project the political cartoon on the overhead if available. Ask students to take 30 seconds to discuss the meaning of the cartoon with their partner. As before, circulate, and then refocus by asking questions to the whole group, then selecting a student to answer.

3. Ask why it is important for public schools to teach about religion, and why is it difficult for schools to set standards for the teaching of religion. Ask students to brainstorm at least two reasons why schools should teach about religion, and then why it is difficult. Circulate, listen to answers, then select students to answer. As students answer, record answers on a T-chart. Wrap up by asking for volunteers to share answers. Point out that freedom of religion is often called the "first freedom" among those listed in the first amendment.

4. Tell students that there is consensus among many groups about the appropriate ways to teach religion, and that these ways are supported by Supreme Court rulings. Point out that these rules only apply to the public school setting. Using the chart provided (teacher's handout # 1), write the appropriate ways to teach religion on the board (these are fairly short, but you may want to have a transparency prepared for this -- one way to do it would be to cover up the right side at first. You may also want to make copies of this for students to keep.) Ask students to brainstorm with their partners for a minute and a half to come up with examples of the "wrong" way to teach religion. Share answers using the extended wait time methods described above. As you circulate, you may need to prompt students if they struggle to come up with correct answers. After calling on several students, reveal the left side of the chart. Read aloud the answers and discuss the items on both sides, checking for understanding often.

5. Now explain that you are going to give students five scenarios or situations in which a school deals with these issues. Tell students that each situation represents either an appropriate or inappropriate way to teach religion. Read the first scenario aloud (each situation is short) and have students brainstorm with their partners for 45 seconds to decide if it represents an appropriate or inappropriate way to deal with religion, and to come up with a specific item (from the chart!) that supports their position. All the scenarios are fairly clear cut and have been ruled on, in some form, by the court system. Continue through each scenario, using the partner method. Circulate as pairs brainstorm and prompt correct answers. Call on selected students, giving opportunities to involve the whole group and carefully soliciting CORRECT answers. While each scenario has a correct answer, the supporting items from the chart may be somewhat different.

6. After completing all five scenarios, tell students that they will now write scenarios of their own. Each pair will create two short scenarios, one representing an appropriate way to teach religion, and one that represents an inappropriate way. They will have three minutes to do this. They will write each of these scenarios on an index card, then write their rationale below it, along with their judgment of inappropriate/ appropriate. As students work, circulate and prompt students. Call on selected students and have them explain their scenarios. Collect the remainder of the cards. Some students may have tricky or difficult scenarios -- explain that these are the ones that usually have to be ruled on by the court. After discussing the situations, check for understanding by reviewing the chart.

#### Assessment:

Explain students will now write a short lesson plan of their own to demonstrate their knowledge. With their partners, have students brainstorm for one minute to answer the question, "What are some things schools should teach students about religion? " Then have partners share with the whole group. After students have topics in mind, distribute student lesson plan and have students complete.

#### Sources :

Clinton's Statement on Religious Expression in Public Schools (1995)  
ERIC Digest "Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum" (1993)  
Finding Common Ground, (3rd ed.) Charles Haynes & Oliver Thomas, First Amendment Center (1998)  
Perk Committee Brochure (1999)

## **Religion in Public Schools**

### **Appropriate ways to teach religion in public schools:**

- \* as information
- \* teaching about religion
- \* allowing purely private speech by students
- \* the same way a political topic is taught
- \* noting that a failure to teach anything about religion at all promotes the idea that it has not played a significant role in U.S. or world history
- \* noting that while many religions have significant similarities, they also differ in significant ways.

### **Inappropriate ways to teach religion in public schools:**

- \* as indoctrination
- \* teaching a specific religion in order to convert students
- \* coercing the conscience of a student or conveying an official endorsement of a particular religion (or a religious perspective over a secular one)
- \* discriminating against private religious expression
- \* taking sides on matters of religion
- \* school sponsorship of a religious message
- \* teaching that all religions are basically the same

## **Scenarios on Religion in Public Schools**

Situation #1 Smith County High School allows the SWAT (Students with a Testimony) Club, which is a Christian organization, to meet during a time devoted to clubs -- any student has the option of joining the club or not. Many other clubs meet at the same time as the SWAT club.

(appropriate -- allows religious groups the same access as other groups without coercion of students)

Situation #2 Students at Smith County High School are forbidden to wear "WWJD" bracelets as part of the school dress code.

(Inappropriate -- forbids private religious expression by students)

Situation #3 The principal of Smith County High School leads the student body in a prayer at the beginning of a graduation ceremony.

(Inappropriate -- conveys an official endorsement of religion, esp. Christianity. A recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling also makes it illegal for students to do this .)

Situation #4 Smith County High School offers an elective class entitled "Bible History" which uses the Bible as a textbook.

(Inappropriate -- presenting the Bible as an official historical record conveys an official endorsement of Christianity)

Situation #5 Social studies teachers at Smith County High Schools teach the concept of predestination (A Calvinist Christian belief that God decides the eternal fate of all human beings prior to their birth.)

(Appropriate -- teaching about a religion)

Student Handout #1

**Student Lesson Plan : Creating an appropriate way to teach religion in a public school**

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Why is it important for students to know this?

Objective(s):

What do you want other students to know and how will you measure that?

Procedure(s) and Materials:

List what you will need to teach this lesson and the steps you will use to teach it.

Assessment:

Describe what you will do to determine that students learned this information:

Explain why you feel this is an appropriate method for teaching religion -- use information discussed and notes taken in class

